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The Cost of Commuting

WITH A KEY federal approval expected soon for the proposed intercounty connector — the east-west toll highway that would transverse Maryland suburbs — the road's opponents are mounting an eleventh-hour anti-ICC campaign. Having failed over the years to sway the traffic-weary public with other arguments (environmental impact, cost, effect on traffic), the foes are focusing on how much the road will cost to use. This, too, is a losing argument.

Brandishing the state's own figures, the opponents say the highway's tolls would make it prohibitively expensive for some low- and middle-income drivers. Peak-hour daily commuters who drive the road's entire 18-mile length would pay about \$1,500 a year in today's dollars and could pay \$1,800 a year by the time the road opens. For someone whose take-home pay is \$30,000 a year, that represents about 5 percent of earnings — a painful bite. Moreover, the new road is likely to be more expensive to use than toll roads elsewhere — 13 to 17 cents a mile as opposed to a national average of 9 cents, the critics say.

If the projected figures are correct — and state officials caution that the ICC's tolls have not yet been fixed — some portion of the road's users undoubtedly would find it burdensome or unusable. That's true of many other toll roads, especially newer roads where receipts must help pay for mainte-

nance and also construction of the road itself. Lower-income drivers who need to travel east-west through Montgomery and Prince George's counties might have to continue using the same inconvenient, congested routes.

But the fact is that not all public amenities are affordable to all. Strathmore, Montgomery's new performing arts center, was built with tax dollars but is still out of the reach of some county residents. In the case of the ICC, financially pressed commuters might have to choose between paying up to \$6 a day for a quicker drive to work and other spending choices. Nor is it surprising that tolls on the connector might be higher than the national average. After all, practically everything preceded by a dollar sign in the Washington area is much higher than the national average — including personal and household incomes.

The intercounty connector is no panacea; it will not alleviate traffic on the Capital Beltway or ease the commuting lives of every resident of Montgomery and Prince George's counties. But it remains the only major highway likely to be built in the Maryland suburbs after decades of road-building inertia, and there is little doubt that connecting two important, economically vital corridors — Interstate 270 in the west and Interstate 95 — is badly needed. The road's opponents have not negated its overarching rationale.